UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/CONF.151/PC/21
28 January 1991

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

PREPARATORY COMMITTEE FOR THE
UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON
ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
Second session
Geneva, 18 March-5 April 1991
Item 2 (c) of the provisional agenda*

PREPARATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT ON THE BASIS OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 44/228 AND TAKING INTO ACCOUNT OTHER RELEVANT GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS: CROSS-SECTORAL ISSUES

Environmental and development education and public awareness

Progress report by the Secretary-General

I. BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

1. The General Assembly, in section I, paragraph 15 (s) of its resolution 44/228 of 22 December 1989, decided that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in addressing environmental issues in the developmental context, should have among its objectives "to promote environmental education, especially of the younger generation, as well as other measures to increase awareness of the value of the environment."

2. The Preparatory Committee referred to it in several of its decisions. 1/ In particular it requested the Secretary-General of the Conference to co-ordinate and consult with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other relevant organizations in order to develop proposals on environmental education and public awareness for consideration by the Preparatory Committee.

---

* A/CONF.151/PC/13.

91-02775 2096f (E)
GE.91-60281

3. The Preparatory Committee also requested the Secretary-General of the Conference to draw upon the competence of the organs, organizations and bodies of the United Nations system and other relevant organizations in exploring measures to promote public awareness and education on environment and development, especially of the younger generation, as well as other measures to increase awareness of the risks and possible responses with regard to the issues addressed by Working Group I of the Preparatory Committee.

4. Recommendations were also sought from the Secretary-General of the Conference, in the context of reports requested on several sectoral issues, on promotion of public awareness, education, training and development of endogenous capacities. Specifically mentioned in this connection were the marine and coastal environment, freshwater resources and management of wastes and chemical risks. These questions are taken up in other reports of the Secretary-General of the Conference dealing with specific sectoral issues.

5. A work process has been launched by the secretariat in order to respond to these requests. Views expressed by several delegations during the first session of the Preparatory Committee provided important guidance. Contributions were sought from and made by the United Nations agencies, first of all UNESCO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) and others) and private experts.

6. Major studies and reports which dealt with the issue of environmental education, such as "Our common future: report of the World Commission on Environment and Development", 2/ were reviewed. The United Nations Environmental Perspective to the Year 2000 and Beyond 3/ was also taken into account. Consultations held at UNESCO headquarters on 6 to 8 November 1990 with United Nations agencies and relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with environmental education and public awareness and information provided a valuable input to the work process. An UNCED expert working party engaged in developing proposals on environmental and development education and public awareness also met on 3 and 4 January 1991 at UNESCO headquarters in Paris and discussed the present progress report.

7. The present report is designed to provide useful background material to the members of the Preparatory Committee, in order to promote discussion so that additional guidance is given to the secretariat in developing proposals. There is a pressing need to strengthen the entire educational structure, particularly in developing countries. In the absence of this, the value of any special effort at environmental and development education may be ineffective. However, the present report does not deal with the measures required to strengthen general education, but focuses on the critical need for environmental and development education and public awareness. It explains in summary form the current state of the issue, in particular, the activities of the United Nations system as well as some existing constraints. Some areas for potential action are indicated in the final section of the report.

8. The Secretary-General of the Conference intends to avail himself of the further consideration of this important cross-sectoral issue in preparing a substantial and action-oriented report with concrete proposals to be submitted to the third session of the Preparatory Committee in August 1991.

II. NEED FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

9. The skill and knowledge which humans possess are critical in determining their interactions with nature. Environmental problems that arise from ignorance or lack of awareness are avoidable. All individuals must become aware of their impact, have access to accurate information, the skills and tools to make environmentally sound decisions and an environmental ethic to guide their actions. In the future environmental literacy will be needed not only by the individual but by society as a whole. Global environmental literacy and competence are critical.

10. The challenge of successful planetary management and development is enormous as it entails both the collaborative development of truly sustainable and ulturally appropriate models and the development of a politically acceptable strategy for implementing the model in every day life. Environmental and development education is critical in both these phases of planning and implementation. Accurate information, gathered globally and used by environmentally competent decision makers at all levels will be essential to devise the policies. What is also crucial is an environmentally aware and literate, and thus more responsible, society supporting the political decisions. As environment and development issues are multinational in nature and not confined by national boundaries, the peoples of the world must share their concerns, knowledge and expertise.

11. The needs for environmental education vary greatly both by country and by specific population groups within the country, ranging from awareness programmes to vocationally specific training and in-service courses. While the needs are high so are the potential benefits of actions and the costs of inaction. The innocent or unintentional ecological damage inflicted by an unaware populace constitutes a major, and largely avoidable, threat to the future of both environment and development. The spilling of oil in even small amounts in one's back yard can destroy groundwater. Industrial examples are also numerous. These damages are usually extremely difficult or expensive to rectify and in some cases irreversible. The need for industry either nationally or locally may pressure an environmentally uninformed community into accepting an ecologically inappropriate enterprise. The end results could eventually cost the nation much more than the enterprise brings in local benefit.

12. Governments and public policy makers must be influenced by and responsive to the tolerance and wishes of the public. An environmentally literate society would allow policy makers to make longer-term appropriate decisions.

13. Environmental and development education and public awareness is crucial at all levels and for all peoples. The more knowledge available in the hands of educated people capable of understanding the information, the greater the chances are of significantly reducing environmental damage and preventing future problems. Accordingly, there is a primary need to strengthen in all countries, especially the developing ones, the entire educational system as a prerequisite to environmental and development education. Environmental and development education is instrumental in seeking and achieving sustainable development.

III. PHILOSOPHY OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION

14. In recent years there has been a surge of support for environmental education, in recognition of the need for it, although it is far from evenly distributed. The description which was internationally approved at Tbilisi, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in 1977, and reinforced in Moscow in 1987, is still valid. 4/

15. Environmental education covers the whole environment - natural, cultivated, constructed and social (including political and economic) - and has a time dimension of past and future. It acknowledges the importance of the internal environment of each individual, physical and mental, which so much determines behaviour. It does not seek to push specific solutions to specific problems but to develop in people the ability to seek out all the factors relevant to an issue and make their own assessment of it.

16. It is also holistic and interdisciplinary. It aims to develop not only heightened awareness but understanding of connections and processes, the capacity to make value judgements and assess alternative courses of change, and then to take action to guide change in an environmentally favourable direction. Being oriented towards action means that it aims for more than literacy. Its objective is to develop environmental competence, alongside personal and social competence as a basic objective of education. It treats the human environment as an extension of the person, interdependent with it, to be maintained in a state of health. In many countries it is treated not as a separate element in education but as an essential part of the approach to all subjects.

17. Education until recently has treated the environment as a stage on which humankind can perform what it chooses, and as a supplier of limitless resources. Development and environment and associated education programmes have often been seen as different, even conflicting issues and no links established between them. However, as the environment issue has moved into the centre of economic policy and decision-making, the case for making that link in all areas is overwhelming. Awareness programmes and education can influence behaviour, especially economic behaviour, which in the last instance produces environmental impacts. Hence the need for a sustainable development-oriented education, which should embrace both sides of the same coin. Development properly managed is a creative, action-oriented approach to the environment which is quite consistent with environmental education philosophy. The different people who have been concerned in developing these approaches must work together: their objectives should not be at variance.

18. Environmental and development education is a life-long experience. Education is part of the continuous process of development and its course is determined by many factors. Some of these are guided: by parents in the home, by teachers and lecturers in the formal sector, by a range of organizations and individuals contributing to informal education, by employers or by law. Some are less guided or unguided: by the environment in which development takes place, peer groups, role models (real or televised) and the social norms they represent. Some of the latter influences may be more potent than the guided ones and cannot be ignored.

19. Whether formally or not, everyone is involved in education and all have a responsibility for how others will relate to their environment. Environmental and development education offers a new opportunity for those who are concerned about promoting sustainable development to help to guide human behaviour towards a better relationship with the world. Every intervention into the human environment is likely to have an educational impact which can be assessed: its success in the long term may well depend on how successful education has been.

20. Environmental and development education is for all. Realization of educational objectives requires the involvement of many different groups: the decision makers in government, the specialists who advise them in universities, research institutes, professional bodies and employers' organizations, the national and local government departments, planners, economists, lawyers, industrial and commercial bodies, examining bodies, voluntary organizations and others who channel policies towards those who put them into effect, religious organizations, the media, teachers and students in formal education and finally the general public. All require particular approaches suited to the parts they play in the system.

IV. CURRENT STATE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME ON ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

21. A great deal of activity is already under way at all levels in the field of environmental education.

22. The broad-ranging issues of environmental education, training, awareness and information have been reviewed and put into strategic perspective in the United Nations System-wide Medium-term Environment Programme for 1990-1995. 5/

23. Within the United Nations system, it is UNESCO that bears the major responsibility for environmental education, mainly through the International Environmental Education Programme (IEEP). IEEP was launched by UNESCO in co-operation with UNEP in 1975 in the context of recommendation 96 of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment which stated that

> "The Secretary-General, the organizations of the United Nations system, especially the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the other international agencies concerned, should, after consultation and agreement, take the necessary steps to establish an international programme in environmental education, interdisciplinary in approach, in school and out-of-school, encompassing all levels of education and directed towards the general public, in particular the ordinary citizen living in rural and urban areas, youth and adult alike, with a view to educating him as to the simple steps he might take, within his means, to manage and control his environment". 6/

24. The objective of IEEP is to foster the incorporation of environmental education into national educational policies and plans, curricula, materials and training of educational personnel for all types and levels of education in the United Nations Member States. Most notably, IEEP has achieved a multiplier effect of environmental education for all types and levels of education at the global, regional and national levels.

25. The major impact of the IEEP is:

(a) General awareness among educators (education ministries and universities) of the need for developing environmental education as an essential dimension of formal and non-formal education;

(b) Clarification of the concept and philosophy, goals and objectives, guiding principles and needs and priorities of environmental education;

(c) Development of strategies and guidelines for incorporating environmental education into ongoing educational policy and planning as well as into formal and non-formal educational reforms;

(d) Development of strategies and guidelines for the integration of environmental education into curricula for primary and secondary schools, pre-university technical and vocational education, teacher education and university general education;

(e) Development and dissemination of environmental education modules especially curricular prototypes for primary and secondary schools and their corresponding teacher education programmes, and fostering their local adaption;

(f) Orientation and training, in environmental education, of curriculum developers, teacher educators, educational planners and administrators to provide a multiplier effect for promoting and developing environmental education at the national level.

26. IEEP conducts its work through the exchange of information, research and experimentation, curricula and materials development and personnel training towards environmental education for all. Exchange of information and experience has been fostered by Connect, the quarterly newsletter published in six languages and disseminated to 17,500 institutions and professionals around the world, a Directory of Institutions published and disseminated in English, French and Spanish and networking among active institutions. Research and experimentation has been promoted through the implementation of 95 pilot projects in cooperation with national educational institutions. Curricula and materials development has been fostered through the development of environmental education guidelines and strategies, modules on environmental themes such as energy, urbanization, deforestation, problem-solving approaches, interdisciplinarity, and environmental education prototypes curricula for primary and secondary schools and their corresponding teacher education programmes based on subregional needs for Africa, South Asia, the Arab States, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region. Thousands of key educational personnel have been trained through several international, regional and subregional training seminars and workshops and 110 national training workshops. Among the global activities of IEEP were the Belgrade International Workshop (1975) which produced the Belgrade Charter, the Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education (Tbilisi, 1977) and the International Congress on Environmental Education and Training (Moscow, 1987) which adopted the International Strategy for Action in the Field of Environmental Education and Training for the 1990s.

27. UNESCO also has contributed to the overall education and information field, within the context of its environmental science programmes: The Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme, the International Hydrological Programme (IHP) and the programmes of the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC). Through research, these programmes generate technical information that can contribute to sound decision-making about the environment and development, to providing substantive input to up-to-date and policy-relevant information materials, and to the training of specialists in developing countries. UNESCO's overall work in environmental education in the next two to three years will be targeted to the production of innovative materials for different non-specialist user groups, with particular emphasis on curriculum development and decision makers, and to better integrating environmental and developmental concerns.

28. In the third medium-term plan of UNESCO (1990-1995) priority has been accorded to the development of environmental education as part of basic education, including literacy and post-literacy education, for young people and adults alike, as well as primary education and secondary general, technical, vocational and higher education.

29. UNEP implements a comprehensive information and public relations programme in support of its global and regional priorities, such as environmental education. This involves providing communications support and information to the general public and the media as well as specific outreach programmes to defined sectors such as youth, women, parliamentarians, industry, religious groups, the entertainment community and various other NGOs. UNEP's publications and audiovisual materials range from scientific and specialized works to more popular titles. UNEP works closely with other United Nations agencies and international organizations in carrying out its information activities, which substantially contribute to raising public awareness in the field of environment and development.

30. Apart from the above other agencies and bodies within the United Nations, (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World Bank, International Labour Organisation (ILO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Meteorological Organization (WMO), World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and others) have programmes of information and more specifically of training concerning certain aspects of the environment. UNESCO has been fostering cooperation and coordination in environmental education and training in the United Nations family.

31. NGOs such as ICSU, IUCN and others have played an increasingly significant role in fostering environmental awareness through publications, workshops and seminars at various levels. Universities are stepping up efforts to promote environmental and development education at the higher level.

32. Recent regional meetings and conferences leading towards UNCED have demonstrated that a number of public awareness activities are taking place or are being planned. The issue of education and awareness was taken up by the Regional Ministerial Conference on the follow-up to the World Commission Report at Bergen, 7/ and at the Meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) on the Protection of the Environment at Sophia. There is, especially in developing countries, a great demand for free and wider flow of environmental information.

V. NATIONAL LEVEL

33. The current state of environmental education is not uniform in all countries and in all regions. Certain countries have felt the pinch and pain of environmental problems such as deforestation, desertification, soil erosion and drought. Others have felt problems of pollution, urban crowding, waste disposal, etc. Most have undertaken actions at various levels for developing environmental education. Some countries have done little more than hold sporadic awareness seminars and/or developed some teaching materials for schools. The situation is far from satisfactory in incorporating environmental education into all types and levels of education. However, it is significant that there is a growing awareness concerning the need for environmental and development education as Governments increasingly feel compelled to support and promote efforts in this field. Grass-roots requirements and local initiatives including those by NGOs have been stressed as the most important factor of change.

34. Constraints are numerous at various levels for the development of environmental education. In many instances it is the weakness of the national education system in general, although in the developing countries especially environmental education cannot be seriously considered except in close relation to overall educational needs. In the execution of the activities of IEEP, it is the lack of needed human resources and in particular funds for facing the challenges of promoting environmental and development education in the context of priorities that may be identified by UNCED. The resistance of decision makers to educational changes is a constraint that may be overcome by efficient and continuous training activities. Some other constraints are crowded curricula, changing the timetables for environmental education activities outside the classroom, lack of pre-service and in-service environmental education training for millions of on-the-job teachers with their millions of students, lack of innovative teaching/learning materials together with problems of distribution of those available and lack of coordination among institutions involved in promoting environmental education development at the international, regional and national levels.

VI. POTENTIAL AREAS OF ACTION

35. The following areas of strategic importance have been identified where action needs to be taken for environmental and development education and public awareness, to prepare the ground for the twenty-first century.

36. Development considerations should be incorporated into environmental education. Environmental and development education and the promotion of public awareness need to be recognized as indispensable tools for bringing about the kind of political, economic and social change required to preserve the integrity of the Earth and to preserve the options for future generations to progress and to enjoy a better quality of life.

37. Governments and the private sector need to realize that they can enjoy direct and valuable benefits from having an informed public and professional community. Education, training and public awareness need to be seen as an underpinning for successfully implementing their initiatives for environmentally sound and sustainable development.

38. Innovative means must be found to communicate the messages of environment and development to the public, and particularly to those segments that so far have not been sensitized to these questions, and to the new actors within Governments, industry and elsewhere who are now called upon to take environment and/or development into account in their work. New technologies should be used, including telecommunications capabilities. Particular attention needs to be given to the vital role of the media.

39. There is a compelling need to integrate the environment and development dimension into all curricula, as well as teachers' training.

40. Different user groups need to be identified for education and awareness building initiatives. Information materials need to be developed which address the particular needs of these different target audiences, including educators and teachers, schoolchildren, various professional groups (e.g. lawyers, economists, industrialists, decision makers, journalists and others). Prototype material should be developed, particularly by the international organizations, so that advantage can be taken of the multiplier effect that such materials can have.

41. Dissemination and exchange of the voluminous existing educational and public information material needs to be improved. At present potential users are not sufficiently aware of what is available, especially what is produced by the agencies and bodies of the United Nations system and by some international NGOs and at the national level. The United Nations system should play a leadership role, as well as improve its own performance in this regard.

42. Access to information about environment and development is an indispensable prerequisite to any effective programme of education.

43. Newly acquired scientific information about environment and development needs to be transmitted more quickly and systematically to educators, communicators and decision makers.

44. The particular needs of the developing countries with respect to education and public awareness should be better articulated and priority should be given to meeting these needs, especially to capacity building. Strengthening their entire education system should be a matter of prime concern.

45. Traditional values, philosophies and lifestyles should be seen as a valuable source of guidance and information for educating and heightening the awareness of people, especially those living in industrialized societies.

46. National reports prepared for UNCED should provide detailed and updated information about the status of environmental and development education and public awareness and identify needs for future action. Such information would serve as the basis for a better assessment of the world-wide situation in this field.

47. Since education and public awareness need to underpin action to address the critical problems of environment and development, these considerations should be examined in all aspects of the work of the Preparatory Committee and

of UNCED. Recommendations concerning the sectoral issues should include education and public awareness, which may appear as one common denominator for the different outputs of the Conference.

48. UNCED should mark the beginning of a period of intense national, regional and international activity in environmental and development education and public awareness. A concerted effort will need to be made to communicate the output of UNCED to people everywhere, in an appropriate language and form, and to provide the resources required to achieve the objectives that Governments will have set in this universally important field.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 46 (A/45/46), annex I, decisions 1/18, 1/20, para. 1 (e), 1/21, para. 1 (h), 1/22, para. 1 (c) and 1/28, para. (e).

2/ A/42/427, annex, chap. IV.

3/ Resolution 42/186 of 11 December 1987, sect. IV.

4/ See UNESCO, Final report of the Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education, Tbilisi, USSR, 1977 (1978) and International Strategy for Action in the Field of Environmental Education and Training for the 1990s (1987). See also Trends in environmental education since the Tbilisi Conference (1983) and Environmental education: selected activities of the UNESCO-UNEP international environmental education programme 1975-1990 (1990).

5/ UNEP/GCSS.1/7/Add.1.

6/ Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 5-16 June 1972, (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.73.II.A.14 and Corr. 1).

7/ See A/CONF.151/PC/10.

8/ Report of the Meeting of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe on the Protection of the Environment, November 1989, Sophia, Bulgaria.